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ABSTRACT

To determine whether teacher intervention or treatment (the introduction of literary devices used by published writers) during the process of writing would lead to greater incidence and improved use of creative devices in gifted children's writing, ten talented students from the ages of six to eleven were selected to meet with the researcher twice a week for 30 minutes. The creative devices that were the focus of the study included effective selection of detail, varied appeals to senses, expressed comparison, implied comparison, word play, unusual structure, vivid setting, unique story idea, well-developed characterization, and experimental point of view. Sometimes the group wrote together, discussed stories, or experimented with creating examples of devices such as exaggeration or simile. At other times the researcher read to the students. Twice the group met with authors. A comparison of preproject writings with postproject writings indicated that the students used more creative literary devices and that age made very little difference in the use of the devices. The younger children wrote shorter pieces and exhibited more of a sameness of style, while the older children wrote longer pieces, in general, and showed more variety. The findings suggest that teacher participation in the writing process can enrich children's writing. (HOD)

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WORKING WITH TALENTED WRITERS

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Miami University (1979-80)

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Recently I saw a story that left no doubt in my mind that the eighth grade writer had unusual talent. The story was exciting, with masterful handling of detail, strong verbs, remarkable vocabulary, and mature observation of human behavior. It was so good that a colleague wondered if it had been plagiarized, but, no, there were some unnecessary repetitions and one paragraph extraneous to the otherwise tightly organized story that revealed the amateur status of the writer. Still, my colleagues and I were in awe of the promise in that one story. Beside the story, in the margin, a teacher had written the single word, "Nice." It seemed inadequate. Of course, out of context of the situation, I cannot be sure if indeed more was needed, but I wonder.

I have worked with, read about, taught about, and thought about children and writing for a number of years, and I am more and more convinced that teachers must not only encourage writing and give some response to the written product; they must also participate in the process. Part of the process would be to help a student before commenting on the product and to be more specific than saying "Nice" by way of encouragement. It is usually not difficult to stimulate talented young writers to write; they write well for their age and they seem to gain enjoyment or other satisfactions from writing. They continue to write with a minimum of outside encouragement. If they are simply encouraged and allowed to write,

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undoubtedly they will learn from their explorations and show some improvement in writing over a period of time as a result of natural maturation. However, one wonders how much more they could learn and enjoy if a knowledgeable and interested person responded to their work along the way and gave them some guidance: Intervention without interference in the writing process.

My office is across the street from our university's McGuffey School, where I have a ready-made laboratory for "keeping my hand in," or keeping up my explorations with children and writing. I can seek some answers to my questions and wonderings. Last year I decided to work with a group of talented writers to see whether teacher participation in the writing process could indeed enrich the children's experience and writing. My project was an exploratory study of whether intervention or treatment (the introduction of literary devices used by published writers) during the process of writing will lead to greater incidence and improved use of creative devices in gifted children's writing.

During the fall semester of the school year, 1979-80, I worked with ten talented youngsters from the ages of six to eleven. Their teachers and I selected the members of the writing group on the basis of interest and talent shown in pre-treatment writing samples.

For the purpose of my study, I defined talented writer as one who already shows some use of literary devices in original compositions. Some examples of interesting things that I found in the early writing samples that teachers shared with me included the following:

1. Good story sense and exciting situations by Christopher, 6½

2. Original play on words by Lisa, 7 -- A flying bat in a cave turned into a baseball bat.

3. Interesting language by Emily, 7 -- A dog named Thisle finds a strawberry bone.

4. Sense of humor, wonderful names, and making fun at story-crafting by Ted, 10 -- In one story he makes everything turn out all right and concludes, "A happy ending -- hurray!" He had solved the problem of Ellerina Potterollakline who ate a radio-active bon bon.

5. Interesting situations like a tree that was uprooted in a storm and started walking around the town by Mike, 10.

6. Good comparisons and marvelous sound words by Jim, 11 -- "Bloom -- a cliff crumbled. Whamo. Zarrp!" "Setting up the camper was like trying to get a giant armadillo in bag."

My original plan was to work with two subgroups of the whole group: one group of five primary children and one group of five intermediate children. I wanted to work twice a week for at least thirty minutes each period with each group so that I could make some comparisons between the groups -- to see what I could do with older and younger children. But when it came time to execute the plan, <u>time</u> itself became a problem. With the children's schedule limitations, and mine, we did well to carve out two times a week to meet. This meant that if I wanted two periods a week with <u>all</u> the children, I had to work with the whole group together. What the younger children lacked in experience, they made up for in spontaneity, and our whole group sessions worked out surprisingly well. Talent and interest were perhaps the keys to a certain amount of cohesiveness in the group in spite of age differences.

The creative devices that were the focus of the study included the following:

effective selection of detail	unusual structure
varied appeals to senses	vivid setting
expressed comparison	unique story idea
implied comparison	well-developed characterization
word play	experimental point of view

I did not proceed to teach these devices in any formal way. I simply kept them firmly in mind, so that sometimes I could set the stage for introducing one of the devices and at other times I could capitalize on on-going activities. It is a fine balance to keep to encourage new things in writing without interfering with the on-going writing. Children's literature provides splendid opportunity to set the stage for pointing out devices that authors use to make their writing more interesting. I used whatever was at hand and never focused on more than one "new" device at a time, unless something too good to miss came up. However, as our experience grew and we had explored several devices, we were reinforcing often as we noticed the devices in our reading and writing. Things that popped up in the children's writing were also examples that we could build on. For example, when Jimmy tried a different kind of structure for a story, and when Lisa used a simile in some early writing, these were springboards to launch us into a discussion of the device and an awareness so that we would look to see what other writers did.

Some good examples of literature to show the various devices include the following:

Tuck Everlasting by Natalie Babbitt	=Selection of detail Appeals to senses
After the Goatman by Betsy Byars	=Expressed comparisons Implied comparison
Tomfoolery by Alvin Schwartz	=Word play
Witching Time edited by Lee Bennett Hopkins	=See different kinds of structure in the stories and poems of Witching Time. See especially "The Witch in the Wintry Wood" by Aileen Fisher.
Mystery at Sans Souci by Jim Hausman	=Vivid setting
Belling the Tiger by Mary Stolz	=Unique story idea (take-off on the fable of Belling the Cat)
Mama by Lee Bennett Hopkins	=Well-developed characterization of Mama
Mystery at Sans Souci by Jim Hausman	=Experimental point of view (Author wrote from his son's point of view)

Sometimes we wrote together; sometimes I read to the children. At other times we discussed stories, or experimented with creating examples of devices such as exaggeration or simile. We worked without pressure in an exploratory way, taking time to enjoy what we did. Twice we met with authors, and the visits brought to life our discussions of what happens in children's literature. For more detail about what we actually did together, see my article, "Teacher Responses to Children's Writing," in the October, 1980, issue of Language Arts.

I gathered examples of the children's writing at the semester's end and compared the post-project writings with the pre-project writings.

Misha Arenstein, teacher and writer, also compared the two sets to corroborate or check my findings.

That the children enjoy writing and can think of unique situations is exemplified over and over in their work. Michael's short stories in the pre-test sample reveal a versatility in handling different kinds of subjects. My favorite story is "The Runaway Tree" which brings fascinating images to mind. However, the idea of being out chasing the dog and discovering a flying saucer from Dogstar (where else?) is a clever one.

My Trip to Dogstar by Mike, aged 10

> One day I was playing frisby with the dog I am taking care of named Rocky. All of a sudden he started barking in an excited way. Then he ran up the driveway and into the path that led to Pine Forest. I ran after him, but he went faster than me because he could go through the brush more easily than me. Then he stopped and I caught up to him. I looked behind Rocky and saw a hugh flying saucer.
>
> Rocky barked, but he seemed to be saying, "These are my friends from Dogstar, hop in and we will get going."
>
> I stepped inside and all around me were colored lights flashing on and off. The ship moved so fast that it took only two days to get to Dogstar. When we got to Dogstar I stepped out of the ship and started to float away -- Help! I screamed, then I woke up.

In the post-test sample, Mike again uses the first person to narrate a variety of experiences. His "Experience with the Devil" is well done and shows rather skillful handling of many of the devices we talked about in our sessions; namely, expressed and implied comparisons, appeals to different senses, and effective selection of detail. His story of being lost in a book shows much imagination and also some interesting writing devices; the whole story is a play on words and it is certainly a unique idea.

My Experience with The Devil

It was a cold winter night. I stared into the fireplace where there was a small fire going. All of a sudden the fire roared up to a great blaze! Then it started to catch on fire! I ran, but the fire followed me! I tried pouring water on it, but the fire kept roaring up. All of a sudden the flames engulfed me, but I did not burn. I felt a strange whirling and I was in an atmosphere where all there was, was fire. Then an awful-looking creature came up to me. It had a tail with a spade-shaped tip. Its eyes were scarlet fire. I knew it was the heart of evil. It was a devil.

"Hello," hissed the devil. "I am Satan. Of all the goodie-goodies on earth, I picked you to turn into a devil."

I tried to run, but my feet were like lead. Even if I could have run, there was no place to go. I was in the deepest corner of hell. The devil said some evil sounding words and there was a loud crash and a flash of lightning, but nothing happened.

"The spell didn't work!" hissed the devil. "It's the force from above!"

All of a sudden there was a whirling and I was back home.

In another post-test story called "The Time I Got Lost in a Good Book," Mike gets literally lost in an Agatha Christie mystery. He says in the story, "I was just getting to the first murder when all of a sudden the words started getting bigger and bigger, then they were not words at all." Mike finds himself in the old city of London and actually involved in the story. As he walked into town, he couldn't help noticing that everything "was on a piece of paper about 500 square yards." Even though he was in the story, he seemed to be invisible, for no one noticed him. After he witnessed the murder, however, he was finally able to tell

"Hercule Pairot." Then the book started shrinking and he was back home, reading.

Elizabeth, aged nine, was preoccupied with mysteries in the pre-test samples, and while much was reminiscent of Nancy Drew, an idea of "Walking Statues" was intriguing. In the post-test sample she branched out from mysteries and showed a delightful flair for telling a story. She took the subject of a school report and turned it into an interesting and humorous account. In the story, the narrator's sister has to write a report and has chosen to do it on telephones; hence the title, "The Telephone Report." Elizabeth writes, "What's there to phones that people don't know? I asked.

We see plenty of pictures of phones and there's always a note about each phone! People know everything!"

When the sister announces that the reports are going to be read aloud in a microphone at a P.T.A. meeting, the narrator is still skeptical about the sister's having a very interesting report. "But what about the details? I cried out. WHAT ABOUT THE DETAILS??"

Elizabeth seems to have taken the effective selection of detail to heart.

Working with the children gave me an opportunity to see their growth over a semester's time. Misha Arenstein could also see the growth in the children. He wrote, "I liked much of what I saw, the growth, the freeing-up of children so they can write. The group has made progress. ... I was impressed by the differences in growth. I think that shows that the children were treated as individuals."

Misha commented on each child's efforts, and, of course, I was interested to see his perspective on the children's work.

For example, Misha enjoyed Jim's "White Water Bear" and "Skunk Moon" from the pre-test sample. He wrote: "A writer who expresses feelings! What a wonderful ability to portray excitement and warmth. (White Water Bear) I, too, like his sounds in 'Skunk Moon.' What titles! I'll hire him now!"

White Water Bear
Jim aged 11

We arrived at White Water Lake Camp at about noon time. Setting up the camper was like trying to get a giant armadillo in a bag. Because of the trees, the lake wasn't really white, it was brownish. The bottom was sticky with vine-like stuff. It was like a swamp. We'd been there several times before, but I'd never seen bears in the woods. Couple days later my mom woke me up one morning to come and see! When I came to the window I saw ... a black bear! Wandering down the road. I felt a wave of happiness pass over me. I'd seen a wild bear! I felt as if I had just seen my bear. Roy didn't make it; he got tangled in his sleeping bag. Dad said he saw him first. He was emptying the portapotty when he saw it. It scared him good!

the end

Skunk Moon

Captain John Skunk pulled his coat closer. This moon was colder than most of the others the explorer ship Pew had studied. The moon was busy. Sergeant Walter was directing the setup of a thermal heating unit. Corporal Bogard was instructing the Astro drillers as Private Sluke lowered a panel onto the barracks. Then Captain John strapped on his flying pack and flew up to the top of a cliff.

"How's the radar tower coming?"
"Fine, Sir, just fine."

Bloom! A cliff crumbled! Whamo. Zarrp! Ship astro blasters.

"Fire!" Captain John yelled. "Find cover!" Corporal Bogard cried, jumping into a tunnel.

Broom! Broom! The ship rocked as the blasters fired.
Caroom!
The ship dropped a broken rudder and a blown engine. "It's a robot Captain!"

"All right, Private, destroy this ship!"
Broom Zam Bang Pow!
"Good work, let's go have some lunch."

End

Misha wrote about Jim's post-test writing as follows: "Post: his story, untitled, tries to cover too much ground. It's well-written but fails to draw the reader in; it lacks detail. ... Conversely, his conversation or fight between crooks and kids is well-written, fast-paced, and will capture a reader's attention."

Excerpt from "Untitled Story"

Just then, "Pssst, hey guys. Who's that? It's us, Jim and Pim. Quick, untie us. Say, how'd you escape? We heard them coming and hid just to see who it was to make sure," Jim said as he untied them.

"Let's go get 'em!"

Before the crooks could draw guns, they were on them! Surprisingly, Pim was the first one there! Crack, Pim went in to that cougar swinging. The otters with Jim followed. The possum brothers were taking turns on Snide. Joe and Harvey were taking care of the coon brothers Max and Dagmer. Super Coon had taken care of Brutus.

Several days later, the gang went into town with one treasure chest and five crooks.

Misha commented on another story as follows: "His baseball story shows the same ability (for fast-paced action). This child has the ability to capture action well. His sentence structure upholds his view. There is much better use of this skill in the baseball story than in 'Skunk Moon.' You got him to improve an existing skill. Good ..."

Evidently Misha saw better control of the action in Jim's later work. I myself saw some beginning efforts at metaphor: attempts like, "You're all heart," and "The Cadats did vanquish the Warriors," the latter from a basketball story, in which the players used the basketballs "like swords."

How much improvement could one reasonably expect to see in a semester? Some growth due to natural maturation certainly is expected. Other than that, a teacher rejoices to see experimentation with new forms, literary devices, and varied subjects. In my report to the Laboratory School about the Talented Writers Project, I wrote about my findings thus:

> The questions explored and some of my conclusions about the project are as follows:
>
> 1. Will intervention-treatment during the writing process aid gifted children to use more creative literary devices in their writing?
>
> I can answer with a limited "yes," as the pre-test samples showed few, and usually none, of the devices, whereas the post-test samples showed beginning usage.
>
> 2. Will intervention-treatment during the writing process aid gifted children to use creative literary devices more effectively in their writing?
>
> Again, I can give a limited "yes," as any appropriate use at all is assumed to be more effective than none.
>
> 3. What are the similarities and differences between the writing processes of older (intermediate) and younger (primary) children?

It turned out that all ages could use the devices effectively; once started, age makes very little differences. It's the individual interest and talent that seem to count. Of course, the writing was more difficult physically for the younger children. In spite of that, at first the younger children were more open to exploration, and the older children, more reserved.

4. What are the similarities and differences between the writing products of older and younger children?

The younger children wrote shorter pieces and exhibited more of a sameness of style. The older children wrote longer pieces, in general, and showed more variety. Again, all can have creative products. The differences close as children mature. . . that is, they close in so far as effective usage appears in the product. The differences in style, ideas, and choice of topics continue to widen.

The children's improvement, if any, over the semester may be due solely to natural maturation. On the other hand, there is some evidence in our small sampling of a trying out of devices that we have talked about in our semester's work. Perhaps the biggest changes in actual writing performance came in the stories of the middle graders, Mike, Elizabeth, and Ted. But the changes in the writing of the beginning primary children were big ones for their age level, no doubt. Their handwritten "originals" show much growth in handwriting itself. There are dramatic changes from large manuscript writing to smaller, more controlled writing. That <u>in itself</u> took energy. Then, too, they branched out in their experimenting with different kinds of stories. The older children continued more in line with what their pre-test writing samples were like, but they did not have as far to come in hitting their own style as the younger ones.

All the children continue to show talent, and, ... it seemed to work out well to keep them all together for our sessions. The younger ones kept up very well, and what they lacked in experience, they made up for in enthusiasm and openness to exploration. The older ones were more reserved and the openness of the younger children sparked the creativity in all of us.

I concluded my report last year by suggesting that "another study might question the long-term gains by studying the children's writing after one or two semesters have elapsed." Another suggestion was to interview the children "to try to determine whether becoming aware of the literary devices made them self-conscious in their writing."

After writing that report, I was on sabbatical leave, and did not do any follow-up work with the children. However, in the past few weeks, I have talked with some of the children and have looked at their most recent writings. They have been very open with me and willing to share their journals, and I treasure that acceptance.

Here are some excerpts from interviews taken one year later:

Christopher, our youngest, has just turned 8, and is in the equivalent of second grade. He is now in a Junior Great Books group, and he says, "This is for good readers." He's also in another writing group, and to quote Christopher, "It's for all the people who have good minds and write good stories." This group meets every Friday. Christopher says he now writes "all kinds of stuff, things I'm interested in like ghosts, creatures, unidentified objects, wild life, space, and wars."

I asked him, "Do you ever think about what we talked about, when you read?"

Christopher answered, "Yes."

"What do you remember?" I continued.

"We would read stories and talk about authors. We talked about words -- uncommon words."

"Anything else?" I asked.

"You," Christopher said simply.

Christopher went on to tell me about his writing now:

"When I write stories, I like to make pictures. I make up my own ships. I like using my imagination. Or, otherwise, when I can't think of anything, I make a picture and then I write a story. I like to make up my own people, too."

Something else has changed about Christopher in addition to writing growth. Now that he is older, he prefers to be called Chris.

Chris is still in the primary unit, and Elizabeth is still in the intermediate unit and now ten years of age. When we talked, I asked her if she ever thinks about what we talked about last year in the writing group.

"Yes, I do," she replied. "I wrote to Beverly Cleary, and I was surprised to get a return back, because I didn't think authors took the time to answer letters."

She added, "Sometimes it comes back to me."

I asked, "It doesn't get in your way -- make you self-conscious?"

"No," Elizabeth said, "We had a Center with similes (A Learning Center), and it came back to me so quickly. It was much easier for me. Also, I'm in Junior Great Books, and it's similar to what we did in the writing group, what we discussed."

Elizabeth continues to write a lot, and she says that one of her teachers makes her "all embarrassed when he brings people in to read this (her stories in her notebook). He always thinks they should be published but I don't think so."

I asked if she minded if I share some in Oregon, and she said she didn't. She said that she thinks the writing group helped her because "you know I want to be an author when I grow up, and it will be neat to have the writing group to look back on."

"Do you mind if I'm putting this down?" I asked, remembering what she had said about being embarrassed.

"I really don't mind; it's an honor," Elizabeth said.

When I closed the interview, I told her, "Well, thank you very much," and Elizabeth said, "It's my pleasure. Thank you."

Mike, who was ten when we worked together, has now been promoted to the upper unit, and is in the sixth grade. His stories seem to show great promise. He is now writing a long story -- 28 pages so far, and he is excited about it. "I expect it to be around 40 pages at the least," he says. From what I read, I would say that it has continuity and holds together very well. I asked Mike what he remembered about our working together.

"I remember about similes and hyperholes; it's like a simile, only it's an exaggeration. Then I remember about using names for characters (interesting or appropriate names). I remember about using descriptions."

"Do you ever think about it when you're reading?" I wondered.

"Somewhat. I guess I think about it more when I'm writing."

"When you're writing, does it help or does it make you self-conscious?"

"I think it mostly helps."

"What was the best thing about our writing group?"

"I think probably meeting the authors."

"Would you want to be in a writing group again?"

"Yes."

All together, I interviewed five of the children, and I was pleased by the children's continued interest and their willingness to share with me. Perhaps the best thing that came out of the writing group is the

children's evident feeling that it was special. Maybe it is not the quantity of attention, but the fact that there is attention (and some moments of quality), for we did not have long together. The children continue to write and to enjoy writing, and they seem to enjoy the memory of a group where they could share their interest. The idea of quality of attention, even though it must be short, has implications for the busy classroom teacher who has many more than ten students to work with. Even though the individual student contact cannot be long, it seems to be important that there is contact. Donald Graves says that "one cannot expect to have contact with each child every time he (or she) writes, but over the course of a week or a month considerable interaction between the teacher and each child is possible while the child is actually engaged in the process of writing." (from "The Child, The Writing Process, and The Role of the Professional" in The Writing Processes of Students. Buffalo: State University of New York at Buffalo, 1975, p. 27)

I keep remembering Christopher's response when I asked him what else he remembered about the writing group. His one word, "You," of course means a lot to me. As you can tell, I remember him and how well he fit into our group, even at six and one half. We enjoyed our time together, but I would like to read some significance into his answer that may not be there in this instance and yet that I think holds true in general. It is the teacher who is the catalyst, who can make the difference whether something will work or not. And to do that, to make that difference, the teacher needs to be part of the process.